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AFRICA: SLAVERY AND EMPIRE

Sub-Saharan Africa in the Era of Global Unification

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After the unification of the world zones, two attributes that had been around since the beginning of agrarian civilizations – slavery and imperialism – were brought to terrible new heights.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

UNIFICATION AND GLOBAL HISTORY

For 10,000 years since the dawn of agriculture, the human experiment played out in separate, isolated world zones, following a similar pattern. The transitions from agriculture, to small states, to large empires, can be told separately for any region: Europe, the Middle East, East Asia, Africa, with a very familiar progression. The details are vastly different, the general thrust is the same. After about 1500 CE, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss the history of one region in isolation from the rest of the world. The unification of the world zones made the major events of all world regions overlap, and it is difficult to understand the history of one region, without knowing the history of another. Such is the approach we must apply to the history of sub-Saharan Africa after 1500.

So far in our tale, sub-Saharan Africa had lagged behind the “first” regions to develop agriculture or states, but was fast catching up. There was no way in which sub-Saharan Africa suffered from the agrarian era in a way that other regions – whether Europe, the Middle East, or East Asia – did not. The drop in the standard of living from foraging to agriculture was shared equally in agrarian societies across the globe. The Fertile Crescent and East Asia independently developed agriculture 4,000 to 5,000 years before West Africa did in 3000 BCE. This is around the time Mesoamerica did as well. The “late” adoption of agriculture did not mean sub-Saharan Africa suffered any major disadvantage. To the contrary, sub-Saharan Africans managed to escape the appalling conditions of early agrarian living for several thousand more years. When it came to the development of agrarian states, again, Eurasia had the “lead” on sub-Saharan Africa by several thousand years, starting around 3000 BCE. Yet when West and East Africa began to develop states around 1000 BCE to 500 CE, very wealthy and powerful empires emerged in the form of Ghana and Aksum. Again, the timeline for Africa more or less “kept pace” with state development in Mesoamerica, which was developing states around the same time.

At no point, so far in our tale, was sub-Saharan Africa “disadvantaged” by arriving at these stages of complexity a little later. In the first millennium CE, West and East Africa’s empires were at their height. Technology was gradually improving, Africa was steadily tapping into the flow of world trade, social hierarchies were becoming increasingly complex, and their armies could hold their own against other world powers.

TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVERY

However, the unification of the world zones and, later, the advent of industry changed all that. The first major blow was struck by the slave trade – which came about as a

direct result of the unification of the world zones. Slavery (in terms of coerced labor) is about as old as agrarian states, perhaps even older. For example, the Romans had slaves, or servi, that in the middle ages had their role transformed into “serfs” – unfree peasants whose lives were little better than slaves. Even the word “servant,” of which there were millions in medieval and early modern Europe who were earning poor wages with little to no job security, is derived from the Latin word for “slave.” In ancient and medieval Africa, it was common practice for people to be enslaved by an enemy kingdom when they were captured in war. When the Portuguese began trading with sub-Saharan Africa in the 1400s, it was inevitable that they were sold African prisoners of war as slave labor.

Yet the Atlantic slave trade might not have reached such catastrophic heights had the Europeans not begun unifying the world zones by “discovering” and colonizing the Americas. Europe around 1500 was full of poor laborers who did all sorts of unpleasant and back-breaking tasks. Work was hard, wages meager, and in times of famine or economic decline, employment could be difficult to find. Competition for work in Europe was so hard there was no room for a massive influx of slave labor.

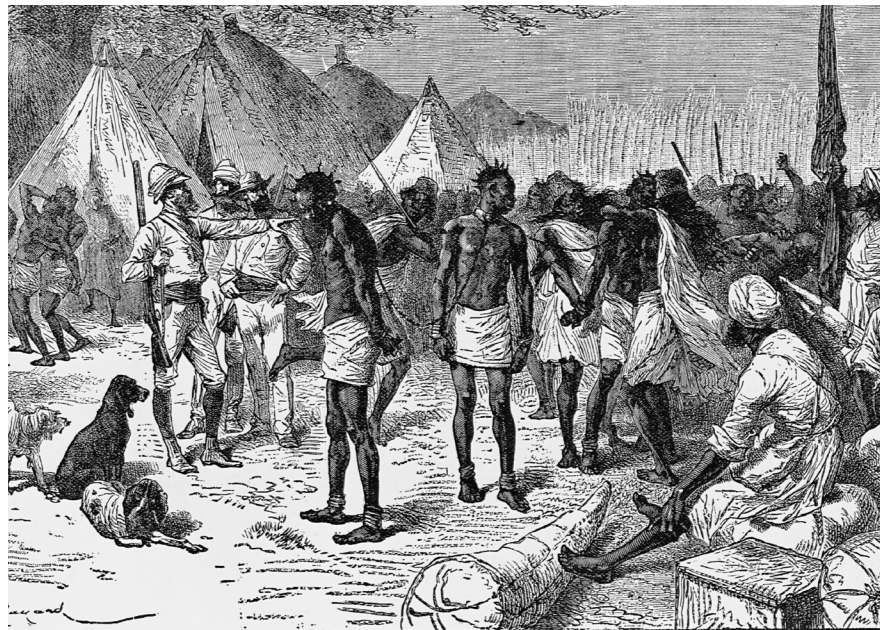
In the newly discovered Americas, however, there was money to be made in cotton, sugar, and tobacco, as well as mining for silver and other mineral resources. The manual labor required for these tasks is extremely unpleasant. Europeans might be willing to work unpleasant jobs at home to eke out a living, but to travel across the world to do an equally unpleasant or decidedly less pleasant job? When it came to being miserable in Europe or traveling across the Atlantic to be just as miserable, lower-class Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries preferred to stay home.

The owners of mines and plantations were thus always facing a labor shortage. The Europeans tried enslaving the natives of South America, but it was problematic since they frequently died of European diseases. If the natives survived, they still knew the countryside and could escape easily. Europeans were often forced to come over to do these nasty jobs as “indentured servants.” If they were found guilty of a crime or were terribly in debt, Europeans would be forced to work as “servants” in the Americas for a few years of a contract before being freed and awarded land of their own. This was one of the only surefire ways of inducing the European poor to come over and work grueling labor jobs in the Americas. But even that didn’t solve the labor shortage since these Europeans didn’t stay servants for long.

It was thus a direct result of the discovery of the Americas and the labor shortage that followed it that the inhumane practice began of transporting millions of Africans

against their will to lives of servitude and often brutal treatment in the colonies. And while the first African slaves were indeed prisoners of war in the 1400s, the situation soon deteriorated as the demand for more slaves grew monstrously large. African rulers soon became alarmed at the rate at which everyday citizens were being kidnapped, sold, and shipped across the Atlantic. Farmers, bureaucrats, even members of African aristocracy were disappearing and were shipped off, never to be seen again. Because of the unification of the world zones, an inhumane ancient practice that all agrarian civilizations in history perpetrated to one degree or another was elevated to unprecedented levels and near-industrial proportions.

The Atlantic slave trade ceased to be just about finding forced labor from prisoners of war or from the lowest classes. African society was robbed and dismantled of its members from all levels, whenever its peoples, regardless of class or role, were unlucky enough to be kidnapped, press-ganged, and sold to foreigners whose language they did not speak, and transported to a foreign land. Such a dissection of society had a profound effect on sub-Saharan Africa's ability to innovate via collective learning. It also robbed the world of African innovations. Educated members of society were fre-



TIPO TIB'S FRESH CAPTIVES BEING SENT INTO BONDAGE—WITNESSED BY STANLEY.

Slave traders capture African villagers to be sold into slavery in the Americas.

quently transported to the other side of the world, having their knowledge cast aside and roles reduced to manual labor. Entire generations of their descendants were deliberately kept ignorant in order to keep them in chains. Millions of potential innovators over several centuries in the Americas were not granted the opportunity to invent and contribute their innovations to the human pool of learning. They were instead forced to toil in the fields or at menial domestic tasks and nothing more. It is in that sense that the slave trade robbed not just Africa, but the entire world, of collective learning. So much potential was lost.

And unlike, say, the slavery of Rome or of the Kingdom of Kongo, where prisoners of war and people of all origins and ethnicities could find themselves enslaved, African slavery made the concept increasingly racialized. Many Europeans believed that the Africans were “inferior” because they seemed so very far behind the agrarian civilizations of Europe and other parts of the world. It became a common justification for treating these human beings as chattel. Fast forward to the mid-nineteenth century and the dawn of evolutionary thinking, and a form of scientific racism bred theories that considered Africans as not only a different group of ethnicities, but a separate species.

Slavery had been in Africa for thousands of years. A trans-Saharan slave trade had existed for centuries, herding off people against their will for forced labor in the Islamic states. Without the discovery of the Americas, there would not have been these vast tracts of land for Europeans to develop, and thus no labor shortage. It was the unification of the world zones that resulted in millions of Africans dying in the cramped and unsanitary bellies of ships while they were transported across the Atlantic. It was the unification of the world zones that led to the subjection of generation after generation of human beings and increasing discrimination against them because of the pigmentation of their skin.

It is often said that the unification of the world zones represents something “new” in Big History. Indeed, for the first time in human history, the world was unified and certain regions were beginning to suffer deprivations that were not suffered by the people of other regions. No longer did agrarian civilizations live out their stories in isolation while similar stories were “echoed” in other corners of the world. For the first time, the entire world was the stage and all the regions were different players. While Europe began to profit from the mercantile expansion of overseas trade, other regions paid the price. For the natives of the Americas, the unification of the world zones meant the death of millions upon millions of people from European diseases. For the people of Africa, it meant being used to feed the tremendous hunger for forced manpower on

plantations and in mines. Lives were destroyed, entire peoples were transported to the other side of the world, and the human cost of this atrocity is still being felt by their descendants today.

INDUSTRY AND IMPERIAL AFRICA

The history of any region after 1500 cannot be taken in isolation. Such is the case with the second great blow to Africa: European industry and imperialism. The stage of total European imperial domination of Africa is often dismissed as a “nineteenth century” thing, but in fact reached its height very late in the century as Europe adopted the next “Cambrian explosion” of cultural complexity in the Industrial Revolution. While sub-Saharan Africa had been “behind” other world regions in its development of agriculture and states, it suffered no major disadvantage in the long term. When it came to the sudden appearance of the Industrial Revolution in the world, suddenly Africa (and much elsewhere in the world) were put at an extreme disadvantage as overnight the power politics of the globe underwent a total game-changer.

While European states had held trading posts, coastal territories, settlements, and political influence all over Africa after 1500, the total domination of almost every region of sub-Saharan Africa came relatively late in modern history. French and Spanish conquests were underway in Muslim Northwest Africa in the early 1800s, the Portuguese were active in Angola and Mozambique, and the British and Boers were established in South Africa. But the majority of imperial annexations of territory by Europeans only happened in the late nineteenth century, known as the “Scramble for Africa.”

Industrial production started in Britain in the eighteenth century and represents a major leap in the power of a society. Around 1750, Britain had begun to adopt the earliest mechanisms of industry. Britain still had a tiny population compared to places like China and represented only a tiny fragment of the total manufacturing output of the globe. In 1750, Britain had only 5 percent of China’s output, but with far fewer people. If you divide the output of Britain by its people and do the same for China, Britain’s “industrial efficiency” per capita was about three times greater than China’s in 1750. And it was sufficiently greater than most regions of mainland Europe too.

Britain had a major head start in industrialization, compared to the rest of Europe and the United States. They only began to catch up in the mid-nineteenth century. This was one of the reasons for the small island population of Britain nevertheless representing the world’s richest and most powerful country for much of the nineteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, places like France and the Germanic states started catching up.

Industry represents a major advance in production. By 1860, Britain’s total manufacturing output outstripped China’s, even though China had a much larger population. It was at this point that serious European domination of the globe was possible.

At the Berlin Conference in 1884, the Europeans formally began to divide up Africa: the so-called “scramble” for imperial domination had begun. While the majority of the world, including Africa, remained at the stage of agrarian civilizations, Europeans were able to dominate and in certain cases directly rule many regions of Africa. It is interesting to note that Britain, only after it was starting to lose its industrial edge against other European powers and the United States, began a more aggressive drive to control more territory in Africa.

West and East Africa both had long-standing agrarian civilizations. Central and South Africa were just beginning to develop states from 1000 to 1500, or even later. As such, in the nineteenth century almost all of Africa fell under European imperial rule except for Ethiopia and Liberia. Not much could withstand the industrial strength of Europe and the new inventions it rapidly yielded: new defenses against previously devastating African diseases and devastating new military weapons like machine guns. In truth, industry represents a relatively “recent” divergence between human societies in the past two centuries, and it is a gap that in the modern age is now rapidly being made up.

But for the time being in the nineteenth century, small numbers of European administrators and soldiers could dominate thousands of square miles in Africa and millions of people. Regions were not divided into African language or ethnic groups, but territories based on which European power dominated them. This had a ripple effect in the post-colonial era, when the borders of countries today still do not much reflect the cultures within them, but the lines drawn during the days of imperialism. In extreme cases, like Rwanda, this placed two hostile ethnic groups within the same country, deeply divided with their differences exaggerated, and in the late twentieth century genocide was the result.

During the period of African imperialism, raw materials were withdrawn from a region in order to fuel foreign economies, and local African economies were not able to develop. If a region is sapped of its wealth it also means that more people are trapped in subsistence living, whereas a vibrant economy can offer new jobs and new positions, fostering collective learning. It is in this sense that European imperialism in Africa deprived the entire world of the collective learning of millions of Africans that the globe could have profited from.



Two colonists examine the rubber collected by the workers on a plantation in French Central / Equatorial Africa.

After having agriculture and agrarian civilizations for thousands of years, for the second time in a few centuries sub-Saharan Africa was placed at a disadvantage in comparison to the rising complexity of the rest of the world. In all, however, the height of imperialism in Africa only lasted from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. This period of domination was a few decades compared to the centuries of the slave trade that damaged the societal and cultural fabric of the continent. Nevertheless, the legacy of European colonialism echoes into Africa's troubles and challenges today. It remains to be seen how Africa will recover and progress in the modern age.

FUTURE PROSPECTS?

From a Big History perspective, sub-Saharan Africa's misfortunes are very much more "recent" than the long period where they played an equal role in the "rise of human complexity" that had proceeded elsewhere in the world. Humans originated there and foraged in Africa for thousands upon thousands of years. Sub-Saharan Africa independently devised their own brand of agriculture and spread it across the entire continent. Very powerful states and kingdoms arose in East and West Africa, and were just starting to build strength in Central and South Africa as well. All this adds up to

thousands of years where sub-Saharan Africa was at the forefront of rising complexity in human history and also the wider story of the Universe.

In contrast, the past few centuries since 1500 have been more painful. There remains the question of whether subsequent history will dictate that this is the beginning of a long and terrible new trend, or whether the collision of the world zones indicates some temporary "growing pains" that afflicted many regions of the world from 1500 to 2000 but will not last. For thousands of years, Africa has been host to some of the most complex things in the Universe: the human species, large brains capable of collective learning, the energy bonanza of agriculture, and the rise of powerful empires. The next few centuries will determine whether Africa plays a central role in the next great transformation of our narrative – the Anthropocene, where humans wield ever increasing control over the complexity of the Earth.

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Cover image: Africa and colonialism, colonizer carried in a hammock by four African porters. © Tarker/Corbis.

Image of slaves: Slave traders capture African villagers to be sold into slavery in America in the 19th century. © Corbis.

Image of plantation: Rubber Industry in French Central / Equatorial Africa, two colonists examine the rubber collected by the workers on a plantation. © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis.

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